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# **Young people's offending careers and criminal justice contact: A case for social justice.**

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## **Abstract**

This article draws on an analysis of young people's offending careers. The research was initiated against a backdrop of changing discourse around youth justice in Ireland with a shift towards prevention of offending and diversion from the criminal justice system. Locating crime and criminal justice contact within a biographical context indicated that participants' offending, and lives generally, was bound up in marginalised transitions to adulthood, and embedded within social and economic environments characterised by high deprivation. The findings support a further shift in focus towards addressing social injustice as a necessary prerequisite to tackle the origins of youth offending.

**Key words:** offending careers, social justice, youth offending, Ireland

## **Introduction**

The research which this article draws on was initiated in 2007 against a backdrop of changing discourse around youth justice in Ireland. The reform of the youth justice system had been underway since the Children Act 2001 (Kilkelly, 2008), introducing a number of areas of change, most notably a shift towards the prevention of offending and diversion of young people from the criminal justice system. Subsequently, the *National Youth Justice Strategy 2008-2010* (Irish Youth Justice Service, 2008) set out five goals, three of which focussed on diverting young people from offending behaviour, promoting the greater use of community sanctions and providing a safe and secure environment for detained children to assist their early reintegration into

society. On the one hand, the Strategy put forth a holistic response to youth offending – including universal aims to promote child well-being – yet the individualisation of the social problem continued with a commitment to deliver programmes and services targeted at ‘at risk’ individuals and families, considered identifiable through a process of risk assessment, and the requirement for young people to be held accountable and to develop ‘socially responsible behaviour’. Such developments, however, have occurred against a backdrop of a dearth of empirical research on youth crime in Ireland (Seymour, 2006). This study thus aimed to go some way in addressing these gaps in knowledge.

### **Research context**

‘It would be difficult to comprehend an individual criminal career without also considering concurrent, wider experiences of transition not normally surveyed in criminology’ (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005: 172).

Barry (2006) questions the ability of existing criminological theories to explain the course of young people’s offending careers and advocates an approach that locates offending in the wider social context of youth transitions. A programme of research in

the North East of England (see Johnston et al., 2000; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Webster et al., 2006) has gone some way to achieve this, using a biographical, longitudinal approach to examine the interdependent, concurrent multiple careers in youth transitions. In doing so, leisure, criminal and drug-using careers were added to the careers traditionally considered in youth transitions research (school-to-work, housing and domestic). These studies explored the ways in which individual risk factors interact, at different stages, with the structured opportunities facing young people, seeking to understand both their active role and limited choices as well as the historical, cultural and socio-economic conditions of neighbourhoods in the making of criminal careers (Webster et al., 2006: 8). 'Failure' to make successful transitions into adulthood along the various career lines has been highlighted as potentially contributing to offending. For example, Barry (2006) found that responses to 'failed transitions' which involve offending can be understood as a means for young people to gain social, economic, cultural or symbolic capital during a period when young people have 'few socially recognised means of legitimating their stake in the social world' (Barry, 2007: 193). In this way, her findings echo arguments made by Craine (1994) who identified young men who adopted illegal ways of achieving or increasing their income as an 'alternative career' when they failed to attain employment. These

experiences resonate with Young's (1998: 70) notion of the 'frustration of aspiration' that results from exclusion from the labour market:

They are cast adrift; a discarded irrelevance locked in a situation of structural unemployment...They are barred from the racetrack of the meritocratic society yet remain glued to the television sets and media which alluringly portray the glittering prizes of a wealthy society.

The impact of this exclusion would not be so detrimental, it is inferred, but for the fact that the media makes known to excluded youth the wealth and opportunities available to others. It is out of this 'relative deprivation' (Young, 1999: 48) – and associated feelings of frustration and anger – that violence and crime may evolve.

This article focuses on two areas of transition – leisure and school-to-work careers – and examines the interaction of perceived marginalised positions, located within the economic and social context of young people's lives, and their offending. By examining participants' criminal justice transitions, it finds that punitive measures further marginalise young people and suggests that responses to offending should focus on wider contexts beyond individual criminality.

## **The study**

The research aimed to understand the processes related to young people's offending transitions, including their initiation to offending and the subsequent course of their offending careers. Broad criteria were used to identify young people who were eligible to participate in the study to facilitate a sample that was diverse in age, gender and offending history. Thirty-seven young people, 26 males and 11 females, participated in the study aged between 14 and 23. All participants were in contact with criminal justice agencies in Ireland and were recruited from probation projects, individual probation officers and a Garda Youth Diversion Project (community based, multi-agency crime prevention initiative).

The study was informed by an interactionist conceptualisation of criminal careers (see Ulmer and Spencer, 1999) and required a focus on young people's interpretations of events and the sense that they make of their social world. The life history interview was employed as the primary method of data collection, prioritising the understandings and significance that people give to their lives (Chaitin, 2004: 4). It also facilitates an understanding of offending as it interacts with multiple dimensions of individuals' lives. At the outset of the interview, participants were requested to tell their life story and subsequently guided through this story, prompted to share

memories and offer reflections, interpretations, and insights (Haglund, 2004: 1309). In addition to a cross-sectional analysis, a biographical analysis necessitated the production of individual accounts. Thus a 'case summary' for each participant was prepared including observations on their offending career and significant turning point moments, that is, 'interactional moments and experiences which leave marks on people's lives' (Denzin, 1989: 70).

### **Offending careers and marginalised experiences of transition**

There is a danger with studies on youth offending that young people will be presented solely in terms of their offending histories, thus neglecting their complex biographies. A life history approach permits an unravelling of biography, thereby providing a critical contextual backdrop to offending careers, allowing an examination of offending as it is interwoven into experiences of making transitions through a number of interdependent careers towards adulthood. Such wider experiences of transition must also be located within their social and economic context.

Having been born between 1984 and 1995, young people in this study had lived most of their lives, at the time of contact with the study, during Ireland's most prosperous



times. Their accounts are illustrative, however, of social injustice, indicated by continued poverty and inequality during times of national prosperity (Goldson, 2002). This research was initiated towards the end of a 20 year period of unprecedented economic growth in Ireland. This period saw a fall in unemployment and an increase in the quality of employment with more job security, less involuntary part-time and/or temporary work, higher wages and a decline in long hours (O'Connell and Russell, 2007). Overall, Fahey et al. (2007: 10) stated that 'subjective well-being and national morale are among the highest in Europe, living standards have risen and have done so more or less for everyone'.

However, the rising economic tide did not lift all boats. Ireland's already high degree of income inequality persisted during the boom years (Fahey et al., 2007) and the gap between those at the top and the bottom of the income distribution widened (Nolan and Maître, 2007). Poverty and social exclusion are not evenly distributed across regions but, rather, they are concentrated in 'poverty blackspots' in urban and rural areas (Haase and Foley, 2009) and in clusters of deprivation within Dublin City (Haase and Pratschke, 2008). Many local communities did not benefit from the economic boom, remaining 'very deprived' during this period despite being the focus of regeneration projects (Fahey, 2010).

There was significant experience of living in such ‘poverty blackspots’ among the participants in this study. Nearly all the young people were residing in one of the RAPID (Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development) areas – ‘the most disadvantaged communities in Irish cities and towns’ (Pobal, 2014) – and in areas where levels of disadvantage had increased between the years 1991 and 2006 or had remained ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ disadvantaged. The impact of living in such areas was compounded by the ‘highly localised’ (Johnston et al., 2000) nature of their lives which have implications for a range of opportunities including leisure, education, training and employment.

*They know what kids are growing up into...They're not going to have jobs and big houses...If you're raised here you're staying here...I'd never move out of [North Dublin], I wouldn't be able to...Do I want to stay here? I'd love to get out of it but I can't.*  
(Ronan, 17)<sup>1</sup>

Taking two elements of young people’s transition to adulthood – leisure and school-to-work careers – illustrates the marginalisation in young people’s lives and the ways in which this interacts with their offending careers. Throughout their narratives, young

people's accounts did not prioritise unconventional goals but, rather, they bought into 'age-related scripts' (Giordano et al., 2003), their aspirations in keeping with what might be culturally expected. Thus, during their early teenage years they aspired towards 'exciting' leisure pursuits and quality time spent with friends. However, accounts revealed that young people struggled with experiences of 'leisure poverty' (Banks et al., 1992), not only explained by structural disadvantage at an individual level, but also at a community level with limited leisure amenities available in the neighbourhood. Eamon depicted the inequity he felt, comparing his neighbourhood to nearby 'posher' areas.

*We had nothing to do and all day to do it. We just had fields, we never had a community centre...We had fuck all, they never done anything for us, society kicked us in the bollix. (Eamon, 21)*

Young people described prolonged periods of 'nothing to do' unsupervised in public spaces and attempted to account for this through the creation of excitement – a need particularly felt by those who had left school or sought to escape adverse home circumstances. In this context, crime enabled them to fund leisure or to create enjoyable or 'exciting' ways to spend time with friends. They thus reported engaging in

criminal activity '*just for the fun*' (Ronan, 16) as joyriding, theft and criminal damage were often presented as activities that created an '*adrenalin buzz*' or '*thrill*' (see Corr, 2014 for a full account of this process).

Participants' accounts of their offending in the period post onset, however, no longer prioritised the enjoyment that offending afforded at an earlier stage. Attaining traditional 'markers' of adulthood (independent living, employment, income, and forming families) became more important during late teenage years and young adulthood. For many, these 'markers' of adulthood were considered out of reach and, for some, offending became an alternative to attain the forms of capital that accompany these conventional achievements.

Taking school-to-work careers as an example, most recognised employment as a legitimate and potential means of generating income and a majority aspired to finding employment. However, the challenges young people confronted in finding employment were also very apparent. Negative experiences of school and/or training were most typically followed by 'fractured' or 'extended' transitions (Coles, 1995) into the labour market as young people entered into training schemes or, at best, took up sporadic, casual, part-time employment, typically attained through local

neighbourhood networks, and offered few long-term prospects. Many recognised their lack of qualifications but also indicated poor levels of knowledge about how to go about seeking training or employment – resulting in evident frustration: *‘You can’t just, “everyone go out and get a job”, hold on, you can’t just go out and get a job. It’s not that easy’* (Eamon, 21). Particular types of crime, including involvement in the drug economy, filled a void created by young people’s lack of access to legitimate means to attain money. Jack – whose employment history was more successful than others – identified a link between his engagement with the labour market and his offending, as crime presented an alternative for making money during periods of unemployment.

*But the times...when I was off [unemployed] I’d be out committing crimes to try and get money...You start to go desperate and you come to the point where you’re thinking of...any sort of way to break the law to get money.* (Jack, 19)

The sense of frustration was heightened for those who experienced critical moments across a number of domains – homelessness, becoming a parent or developing drug dependence – impacting on a need to attain alternative income and illustrative of how transitions across other careers were also interdependent in this process.

*I think it [shoplifting] only started when I was pregnant 'cos that's when I started robbing baby clothes. Before that it was just stupid little things...going down the [shopping centre] fuckin' perfumes and things like that. (Sarah, 23)*

While long-term un/underemployment created a sense of financial strain, the preclusion of entry into the world of consumption (Loader, 1996) had implications for young people's sense of self or status. Some accounts, like Teo's, resonated with Young's (1999) notion of relative deprivation as they assessed being less affluent than others.

*I see some people in the streets, they have a BMW and I see myself and I have nothing...Some people out there...my age, they're totally rich...I'm poor (Teo, 19).*

In addition to generating income, the elevation of status among peers, articulated almost exclusively by young men, emerged as a perceived benefit to offending, allowing them to present a particular image. Ciaran, for example, told that he was 'making more money than [his] ma' when selling heroin, which afforded him the opportunity to attain goods that contributed to a certain image of a 'gangster':

*'...buying Playstations, loads of jewellery and nice clothes. Buying all me friends drink and thinking I was a little gangster, thinking I was the man' (Ciaran, 17).*

This enhanced status was confirmed by a wider group of peers, particularly as young people became known for their successful offending. For example, Joe reported attracting the attention of young women in his neighbourhood who were intrigued by the fruits of his offending.

*All the young ones that wouldn't talk to us before started talking to us...'Cos we had big whopper cars. (Joe, 17)*

### **Offending careers and criminal justice contact**

There was evidence that careers and transitions were punctuated by 'critical moments' in young people's lives which served, in some cases, to heighten their understanding of their circumstances. Criminal justice repercussions – ranging from contact with the Gardaí and experiences of arrest to court appearances, including periods of incarceration – were highly illustrative of the potentially variable reactions to 'critical moments'. Some such moments encouraged a move towards desistance, yet similar events appeared to propel some to further offending.

Fourteen participants related aspects of their contact with the criminal justice system to their continued offending. Some of these accounts depicted the lack of deterrence associated with the repercussions of the youth justice system given the unlikelihood of 'getting caught.

*Sure I never got caught robbing a house and I've robbed a few...Only the stupid ones get caught...cos they're too clumsy...I'm hard to catch. (Shane, 19)*

Furthermore, in the unlikely event of detection, only minor negative repercussions were anticipated, certainly for those under the age of 18 years: '*...I couldn't get done on it [shoplifting]...I was under 18. Then I got caught shoplifting again...and I couldn't stop laughing you know*' (Sarah, 23).

Derek echoed such indifference to detection as a young teenager, given his knowledge of the lack of resources to detain young men under 16 years.



*When you're younger and you're picking up charges, you'd be ripping them up in front of the coppers. You get a charge sheet, you say 'That will be part of the wallpaper, sure there's no beds [in Children Detention Schools]'. (Derek, 23)*

Although official youth justice outcomes were dismissed as minor, ongoing interaction with the Gardaí were viewed more negatively. Relationships with the Gardaí were typically depicted as tense and were cited as provoking further (often violent) offending among male and, less frequently, female respondents. Continued surveillance by the Gardaí was viewed as unjust – young people assessing that they were being treated differently because of their offender 'label': *'If they see me they pull me just for the craic [fun]...you'd nothing on you, they'd just stop you and search you...any excuse'* (Shane, 19).

Respondents often described this as harassment and felt that certain members of the Gardaí were aiming to provoke a reaction: *'You'd say to a copper 'Fuck off' and they'd arrest you and charge you for it'* (Peter, 18). More serious repercussions, however, were evident in a number of young men's narratives, related to interactions with Gardaí. Ronan, whose face was swollen from a 'beating' he had received days before from a Garda, described being the constant subject of Garda surveillance and violence.

*The police are obviously looking for me every day...They won't leave me alone...They keep coming around and hitting me. I'm not going to take it anymore, I'm going to lose the head. (Ronan, 17)*

Ronan later recounted that he did eventually 'lose the head' as he 'snapped' and assaulted a Garda, who was subsequently hospitalised: *'I just got sick of them hitting me all the time...They brought it on themselves'.*

On the other hand, perhaps some narratives could be interpreted as revealing the deterrent potential of criminal justice contact by prompting a period of reflection. For example, Derek, quoted above as *'ripping up'* charge sheets as a young teenager, conveyed an attitudinal change on turning 16 which coincided with an awareness of his eligibility for incarceration: *'When you turn 16 it's a different ball game...there's a load of places for you then'* (Derek, 23). Carly's first court appearance, which led to a suspended sentence, came as something of a shock: *'that was my first time getting arrested in a cell. I was like 'oh my God' and in court, yeah it was mad'* (Carly, 21).

Some of what young people recounted suggested a sense of criminal justice fatigue whereby the 'hassle' of criminal justice contact in the form of harassment from the Gardaí and (repeated) incarceration, was taking its toll. However, deterrent effects were usually short-lived and, frequently, the ultimate impact was to lead young people to a return to offending. Some became 'resigned' to an offending lifestyle, seeing 'no point' to desistance because they already had a criminal record: *'Once I got one charge they just started rolling in. So when I had a few charges I didn't care, I goes 'Fuck it I have the charges now, why stop?'*" (Ronan, 17). Joe's assessment of the criminal justice process was perhaps more calculated and he linked experiences of previous incarceration to his consideration of engaging in more serious offending: *'Then we started doing burglaries, we were thinking 'What's the point in getting locked up for robbing cars when we can go out and do proper stuff?'*" (Joe, 17).

Therefore, responses to offending did not necessarily serve their goal of deterring participants from further offending, thus raising significant questions about the appropriateness of punitive intervention in the lives of young people who offend.

Rather, having attained the offender 'label', young people frequently identified barriers to their transition from a life of crime. All but one young person aspired

towards desistance from crime and shared aspirations towards conventional goals (finding employment, owning a house, and having a family). Whilst respondents reported several points at which they felt their offending could stop, nearly all accounts demonstrated instability in this regard. Accounts suggested the impact of ongoing negative peer relationships, substance use and unsuccessful attempts to enter the labour market, but also included considerable reference to a history of criminal justice contact.

As discussed in previous sections, the offending in later stages of young people's offending careers was largely explained as a means to accrue the capital (economic and cultural) which comes with legitimate transitions to adulthood, not least of all through the school-to-work transition. The offender label and impact of criminal justice measures, however, in turn, limited their opportunities to earn money legitimately, primarily because of its impact on their attempts to re-engage in education and/or accessing or maintaining employment. Mani successfully completed his schooling and had been pursuing a post secondary qualification. However, this endeavour was interrupted by court appearances, resulting in his subsequent withdrawal from college.

*I was in college but then court...came back on me so I had to drop out 'cos the guards...come looking for me in the college...Started affecting my college, family life, my personal life, it just kept holding me back. (Mani, 20)*

Others, like Eoin, who did not 'know what way to look at [his] future' due to 'all these court dates' worried about the delay of entering the labour market due to periods of incarceration.

*If I got locked up for two years, I get out, I'd be nearly 21 then and you're not going to get an apprenticeship then...You could have been qualified but you're only getting out and you have to go looking for work. (Eoin, 18)*

As respondents began to consider their future and the paths they wanted to follow, the existence of a criminal record or a period of incarceration were considered as potentially constraining the opportunities available to them. An inability to 'move on' in their lives was linked to ongoing criminal justice contact, Sarah wanting to have her outstanding charges addressed before ceasing drug dealing: '*I have another two charges and I'm just dying to get them out of the way and then I'm going to be on the straight and narrow*' (Sarah, 23). Louise also felt that she could not move on in terms

of finding employment until her outstanding court dates had passed, echoing Mani's earlier words: *'It's really holding me back from wanting to get out and do things...If you were to go and ask for a job or something like you can't take days off, "I'm in court"'* (Louise, 21).

In a somewhat vicious cycle, young people whose offending had, to a great extent, been located in a context of a failed transition into meaningful activity now found themselves increasingly marginalised in this context as a result of criminal justice outcomes. Thus, punitive measures did not address the underlying processes related to their offending and arguably exacerbated the social injustice young people experienced.

Where criminal justice contact demonstrated the potential to aid young people's cessation of offending, this was focussed on addressing wider needs beyond their criminality. A number of young people, at the time of interview, were engaged in structured activities attached to criminal justice agencies such as attending a Garda Youth Diversion Project or a probation project. For most, this was a relatively new development in their lives. Participants suggested that attending a Garda Youth Diversion Project provided structure to otherwise empty days, particularly for those

who had left school early or been excluded. They identified the programmes as 'somewhere to go' in communities lacking in amenities as described earlier. To an extent, the programme addressed the leisure poverty experienced by some young people through the provision of structured activities and the opportunity to socialise with peers. In particular, attendees identified them as a way of '*staying out of the way of the police*' and some, like Ronan, wished they had started attending at a younger age: '*Because they would have kept me out of more trouble*' (Ronan, 17).

Those who attended probation projects did so on a daily basis and often likened the routine to being in employment. This was considered important in establishing a routine and minimising opportunities to get 'bored' or 'into trouble'.

*That's why I'm here [probation project], 'cos if I'm here I'm not in my house bored or out with me mates causing trouble...It's all about routines...do something positive with your time.* (Jack, 19)

However, it was the training aspect of attending a probation programme which was considered vital for enhancing their options and opportunities for the future – some viewed their attendance as a way to '*get back on the right track*' (Sarah, 23) and to

address their limited qualifications due to disrupted educational experiences. As a result, young people identified a programme as having a positive effect on their behaviour as they were able to draw on certain resources to enable a positive change in their lives. They thus presented their engagement as a means of accumulating cultural capital through attaining education and accruing skills, and as a means of taking responsibility for their future as they set about mapping a way forward.

At the same time, however, those who had attempted entry into the labour market had done so to no avail. Such experiences were often disheartening: *'I don't see why you should plan things and know quite well they're not going to go the same way you want them'* (Eamon, 21). Even those who may have been successful in attaining employment at times, continued to weigh up the monetary benefits of going out to work and the potential 'earnings' from crime.

*You're going out to work fuckin five days a week probably, sometimes six, slaving, working away, hours and hours and then probably getting fucking €500 and I probably would have made that in a day doing what I was doing.* (Dara, 23)



In this way, even if the young person had successfully moved towards desistance, the draw of the potential proceeds to be accrued from crime continued to exist. The pursuit of economic capital through means other than offending continued to be blocked as respondents failed to access the labour market.

## **Discussion**

The above account set young people's offending careers in the context of wider transitions to adulthood. Strained leisure careers, contextualised by highly localised experiences in deprived neighbourhoods, provided the setting of the emergence of young people's offending. Participants' experiences of school-to-work transitions were illustrative of how their marginalised positions heightened a perceived need to offend. The relationship between criminal justice contact and offending was somewhat more complex than a linear connection as experiences of the criminal justice system served to propel some young people into further offending while it acted as motivation for desistance for others. The account also depicted the ways in which criminal justice responses served to further marginalise young people's positions as they began to appreciate the barriers to 'moving on' in their lives, particularly through access to education and employment. It thus resonated with earlier findings that criminal justice contact can have an adverse impact on young people's lives and may make it less likely

they will cease offending (McAra & McVie, 2007). Young people's interpretations of this connection are vitally important for a consideration of policy designed to divert young people from offending.

The study's findings go some way to support the implementation of a strategy of diversion and the limited use of punitive intervention and thus the policy direction in Ireland has been a positive move. In particular, the findings do not support heavy criminal justice involvement in the lives of young people, especially given that all but one expressed a desire to desist in any case. However, the responsibility of diversion lies with the Garda Juvenile Diversion Programme, thus bringing young people 'at risk' of offending under the purview of criminal justice agents at a young age, perhaps even before their first offence. Thus, this raises questions regarding the ability of the Programme to effectively divert young people from the criminal justice system.

The study found that becoming 'known' to the Gardaí as a potential offender or 'at risk' of offending may increase the likelihood of future criminal justice involvement, irrespective of their offending behaviour, thus echoing findings of the Edinburgh study (McAra and McVie, 2007; Smith, 2006). The 'resignation' of some young people to offend given constrained opportunities as a result of criminal justice contact, in

particular, further emphasised the negative impact of labelling processes which hold young people back from moves towards desistance. Goldson (2010) has similarly highlighted these counter-productive tendencies suggesting the complete removal of the child from the criminal justice system:

Perhaps removing children and young people from the reach of the youth justice system altogether, by significantly raising the age of criminal responsibility, comprises the most effective diversionary strategy (Goldson, 2010: 163).

A moderate version of this argument, as set out by Smith (2006: 15), recognises that some young people involved in offending have deep-seated problems that do not recede with time and that more serious offending does have to be dealt with. However, as he continues, 'a policy of increased intervention by the juvenile justice system is unlikely to lead to a reduction in youth offending' (2006: 15).

The principle of detention as a last resort, given the negative impact of periods of incarceration on young people's ability to 'get on' with life, must remain the guiding principle. Thus, supporting the greater use of community-based sanctions for those young people convicted of a crime, as an alternative to detention, is appropriate. This is particularly desirable given the study's findings on the positive impact of structured

probation programmes on young people's ability to desist from crime. These community-based programmes, however, must address those aspects of young people's lives that are most closely attached to instability in terms of further offending – employment and education/training have been emphasised here – and thus extend their scope beyond criminality.

The responsibility for the prevention of and response to youth offending, and crime in general, lies within the Irish Youth Justice Service and the Department of Justice and Equality. Despite principles of diversion, strategies to respond to young people who offend (and who are 'at risk' of offending) remain within the remit of the criminal justice system. More recently, debate has drawn attention to a need to shift the focus from criminal justice to social justice, which implies 'providing fair and decent treatment for all citizens across every domain including housing, health, education and employment' and allowing 'personal advancement to all citizens' (O'Mahony, 2010). O'Mahony continues to state that 'social justice is largely redistributive justice, concerned with limiting, reducing or redressing the inevitable disparities that arise in modern societies'.

This study's findings support such a shift in focus to addressing issues of social justice. Ireland always had a high degree of income inequality which persisted during the boom years (Fahey et al., 2007). During this period of sharp economic growth, however, levels of relative deprivation and the gap between the affluent and poor increased, thus indicative of social *injustice*. Signs of an economic downturn began to emerge in early 2008 and Ireland entered recession in mid-2008, seeing a return to high unemployment, falling income levels and cuts in public expenditure. Public spending cuts, particularly cuts in social welfare, are likely to have 'significant consequences for poverty risks' (Russell et al., 2010: 102) and are likely to place particular strain on those already living in socially excluded contexts (Yates, 2012).

The rhetoric of contemporary discourse in Ireland surrounding youth justice, whilst having all the trappings of a holistic response to youth offending, nonetheless adopts mechanisms indicating the continued individualisation of the social problem. As this study's findings demonstrate, however, young people's offending, and lives more generally, was embedded within social and economic environments characterised by high, and in some cases extreme, deprivation. Addressing social inequalities and relative deprivation, therefore, is a necessary prerequisite to effectively tackle the origins of youth offending in poor communities. That there is 'no doubt that social

inequity contributes to the disaffection and alienation which expresses itself in anti-social behaviour' (Committee of Inquiry into the Penal System, 1985) is not a new argument. In fact, after 30 years, the enlightened recommendations of the Whitaker Committee, established to investigate aspects of the Irish penal system, still hold relevance.

'Given this catalogue of the major causes of criminality it is evident that concern for social progress and equity, and pursuit of economic development necessary to sustain it, must be the constant preoccupation of a just and enlightened society... It is only the society which uses its resources effectively to promote equitable progress that can hope to break through the vicious circle of disadvantage, alienation and criminality.'

(Committee of Inquiry into the Penal System, 1985)

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**Endnotes:**

1. All names used are pseudonyms and identifying information has been removed.

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